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SUBJECT: ROH MOO-HYUN: NOT SO LAME DUCK?

REF: A. SEOUL 2026

[1](#)B. SEOUL 3224

Classified By: POL Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: President Roh is entering the last 100 days of his presidency determined to avoid the lame duck fate of his predecessors; so far, he has done a credible job. Former Presidents Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung limped through the last months of their presidencies with single-digit approval ratings, due largely to scandals involving their sons, and in the case of Kim Young-sam, also the Asian Financial crisis. There have been some recent high-profile scandals involving Roh aides, but nothing like either the Hanbo scandal that plagued Kim Young-sam or the bribery scandals that implicated all three of Kim Dae-jung's sons. Although free from scandal, Roh has had desultory popularity ratings for much of 2007, but it appears to be in position to advance some of his policy agenda during his remaining term in office. End Summary

[1](#)2. (C) Roh has been widely acknowledged as a lame duck president since late 2006 when his popularity ratings hovered in the teens, but his final year of achievements have nonetheless been impressive. On February 23, the U.S. and ROK agreed to transfer wartime operational control in 2012; on June 30, the KORUS FTA agreement was signed; and from October 2-4, Roh went to Pyongyang for the second ever North-South summit. Additionally, Roh has periodically tabled controversial proposals that dominated the headlines for a few weeks at a time. For example, in March he proposed that the Constitution be amended to change the presidency to a two-term system. Most agree that a new Constitution is necessary (the current Constitution was written in 1987), but there is no consensus on how much should be changed. Polls in the spring overwhelmingly reported that, support for an amendment notwithstanding, Roh should not oversee the process. The proposal fell flat, but many pundits speculated that Roh did not propose it with any expectation the amendment would pass, but rather to shape the political agenda and build his legacy as a president who fought to improve the country to his last days.

WHY ROH IS NOT LAME

[1](#)3. (C) Roh Moo-hyun has run a relatively clean presidency, which has allowed him to continue to drive the political

agenda in his final year. While two of his aides are currently under investigation for misuse of power, Roh has neither defended them nor been implicated in their scandals. MIN Consulting President Park Song-min explained to poloff that, while Roh had failed to install his candidate as the progressive United New Democratic Party (UNDP) candidate, this was likely his strategy all along. He noted that Roh is widely acclaimed as a master campaigner and speculated that Roh decided early in 2007 that the presidential election was not winnable and chose to focus instead on the April 2008 National Assembly election. This analysis gives Roh a lot of credit, but Blue House sources as well as other pundits echo the sentiment that Roh has already shifted his focus to 2008.

WHY ROH IS LAME

¶4. (C) President Roh's failure to install a pro-Roh candidate as the single liberal presidential standard-bearer is seen by many as a failure. He supported former Prime Ministers Han Myung-sook and Lee Hae-chan, neither of whom had much public support. Instead, erstwhile Roh supporter Chung Dong-young emerged as the liberal UNDP candidate, largely due to his successful campaign to distance himself from Roh.

¶5. (C) Despite his ability to dominate the political agenda, hold a historic summit and sign a KORUS FTA, Roh is constantly attacked in the press for his failure to manage the country effectively. His inability to control his speech has led to a series of missteps that squandered any support gained from the FTA or the summit. Even his close supporters tell poloff privately that Roh has failed to effectively communicate his policies to the Korean people.

PAST LAME DUCKS

¶6. (C) In the Kim Young-sam administration (1993-98), emboffs observed that Kim, in his last months, appeared to have no particular aim except to finish (Reftel A.) It is largely accepted that the bankruptcy of the Hanbo "chaebol" conglomerate in January 1997 led to Korea's near-insolvency in the Asian Financial crisis. Kim Young-sam was discredited in his final days as his son was implicated in the Hanbo bankruptcy. Obviously, there were other reasons for Korea's economic crisis in 1997, but Kim Young-sam still receives most of the blame. Voters blamed Kim for the economic downturn and elected liberal candidate Kim Dae-jung.

¶7. (C) Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) was weighed down at the end of his term by the bribery scandals involving his three sons. All were implicated in crimes connected to the boom in venture companies during Kim's term. Although Kim Dae-jung accomplished relatively little during his last months in office, political observers note that it is natural to step back in the last months of the term to let the candidates campaign freely and set up their next administration.

KINGMAKERS

¶8. (C) Despite the two Kims' dismal final years in office, they were both able to control the election to a certain extent by selecting their party's candidate. Some speculate that Roh has not been able to play this role because of his limited connection to the political mainstream. While the two Kims built forty years of political relationships which made them relevant within their party no matter their overall popularity, Roh spent his career as a lawyer and a self-styled politician with a knack for the spotlight, but not necessarily for building a political base.

¶9. (C) Many pundits expect Roh to form a new political party

with his core "Roh-sa-mo" supporters in the years to come because he wants to continue on as a political leader in some form. Roh is currently relevant only in terms of what he can do or accomplish, and to that extent, he has had limited success in directing the election. A key Chung Dong-young advisor told poloff that the timing of the announcement to extend the Iraq Zaytun deployment was not coincidental -- it was aimed at giving Chung an issue to use against Lee Myung-bak. While Roh and his supporters do not openly support Chung, they do not, in any event, desire a Lee Myung-bak victory.

NEXT STEPS FOR ROH

¶10. (C) According to Blue House contacts, Roh hopes to model himself on Jimmy Carter and Al Gore and focus on volunteerism and environmental issues in the years to come (Reftel B.) Whether he keeps this promise or stays on the political scene as many expect, Roh will continue to work to foster politics that breaks down regional barriers.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Roh Moo-hyun is a new kind of president in Korea. Deeply ideological, Roh has rallied against the establishment -- the chaebols, the career bureaucrats, elite educational institutions, and traditional politicians. Past South Korea presidents were mostly content to reach the pinnacle and then stay put for five years. Not Roh. He will go down in history as the most energetic and combative president. This is why most observers do not expect him to spend his days as ex-president quietly.

VERSHBOW